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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000422

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SUBJECT: CRIMINAL PLANNING BEHIND POST-ASSASSINATION  
KARACHI RIOTS

REF: ISLAMABAD 228

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, for reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

¶1. (C) Summary. During a visit to Karachi January 25-26, Ambassador heard a consistent message about the violence that wracked the city for three days after Benazir Bhutto's assassination. According to our contacts, while there were grief-stricken mobs, much of the damage was carefully planned and clinically executed, presumably by criminal gangs. Although it is unclear how many Pakistan People's Party members have been charged with crimes related to these riots, the arrests do appear politically motivated. End Summary.

¶2. (C) From several diverse sources, Ambassador heard a similar analysis of the riots that swept Karachi and Sindh in the three days following Benazir Bhutto's assassination. The violence claimed approximately 40 lives, created \$2 billion in damages and lost revenue and left thousands jobless. But, according to the American Business Council, Mayor Mustafa Kamal, Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) leader Farouq Sattar (and separately Minister of Finance Salman Shah), most of the violence was not the work of uncoordinated, grief-stricken mobs.

¶3. (C) According to these sources, the damage was done in a calculated fashion that revealed careful criminal planning, and the loss of life was minimal. Kamal said 1,120 vehicles were burned in Karachi, but many had their CNG gas tanks removed before they were torched. The American Business Council members described how vandals had looted finished products and removed expensive brass fittings before factories were burned. The demonstrators had carried with them sulfur powder to set machinery ablaze. Shah described how computer cables had been carefully cut and mother boards removed before computers were destroyed.

¶4. (C) Kamal and Sattar suggested that the Pakhtun community might be partly responsible for the violence. Karachi has the second largest Pakhtun population (2 million) after Peshawar, and it includes criminal gangs with established links to drug and gun smuggling from the northwest. Kamal noted that the Pakhtuns control the auto rickshaw union in Karachi, and not a single rickshaw was torched during the violence. The Business Council was reluctant to accuse any particular group but noted there was no violence in MQM-controlled areas of the city. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) continues to argue that its members are being unfairly targeted with arrests related to

the violence. Businessman Farooq Hassan probably best described the causes as a combination of criminal and mob-related attacks.

15. (C) As for timing, Kamal and Sattar speculated that the violence had been planned for the original election date of January 8, but perpetrators had acted on the opportunity presented by Bhutto's assassination. Hassan agreed that was a probable scenario.

16. (C) Interlocutors told the Ambassador that the Karachi city services (police, firefighters) were slow to respond to the violence because of fear of attacks and concern about creating further trouble. In at least one instance, a fire truck en route to a blaze was itself set on fire. The national government reaction was slow, and it was several days before Rangers were given shoot to kill orders that finally ended the violence. MQM representatives said that they made a deliberate decision not to engage the demonstrators, as that would have sparked a stronger counter-reaction that would have claimed even more lives. Surprisingly, the Business Council independently made the same assessment. The Council, in particular, was urging the local government to begin emergency planning now for anticipated violence after the February 18 elections and hoped the Army would be deployed to prevent further trouble.

17. (C) The Council raised its law and order concerns in a January 18 meeting with the Prime Minister (septe), and plans to do the same with the Governor of Sindh later this week. They want to avoid any violence around the February 18 elections. The Karachi Chamber of the Commerce, the nation's

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largest, also expressed its conviction that the violence was planned in advance, and has approved local authorities for enhanced security for industrial sites during the upcoming elections.

18. (C) Comment: The number and level of PPP workers being charged over post-assassination violence remains unclear. Interestingly, none of our interlocutors suggested that PPP party members were responsible for the damages, which may lend credence to the allegation that the arrests were politically motivated. It is unlikely that the investigations now underway will produce much real evidence to settle the question of who was ultimately responsible for the riots in Karachi, but we hope the local and provincial governments are preparing for the possibility of another round of violence on or after February 18.

PATTERSON